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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA'S NEW CABINET: DEFENSE MINISTER DARABOS

Classified by: Economic-Political Counselor J. Dean Yap for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) The following is a profile of Norbert Darabos, of the Social Democratic Party (SPO), who has been named Defense Minister in the new GOA cabinet.

Experience

¶2. (U) Darabos is a holdover from the short-lived cabinet of former Chancellor Gusenbauer. He was sworn in December 2, 2008 for a second 5-year term as Austria's Minister of Defense in the new SPO-OVP coalition government.

¶3. (U) Born May 31, 1964 in the province of Burgenland, Darabos comes from a blue-collar and ethnic Croatian background. He attended a Catholic high school in Eisenstadt, and earned a master's degree in history and political science from the University of Vienna.

¶4. (U) Darabos has acquired a reputation as an effective political operative within the SPO. Prior to his first term as Defense Minister, he successfully organized SPO campaigns, including the 2000 Burgenland state election and President Fischer's successful 2004 run. Darabos was instrumental in helping former SPO Chancellor Gusenbauer win the October 2006 elections despite a widely unfavorable political climate for the SPO and Gusenbauer himself. Following the 2006 election, most analysts pegged Darabos to become Interior Minister. Instead, he was appointed Defense Minister, and in November 2008 was re-nominated for the same post under new SPO Chancellor Faymann.

¶5. (U) Darabos' political career began with a stint as head of the Burgenland chapter of the Renner Institute, the SPO think tank, in 1987. From 1991 to 1997, Darabos worked as office manager and press spokesman for the governor of Burgenland, and then as party manager of the Burgenland SPO. From 2000 to 2003, Darabos was SPO party whip in the state parliament of Burgenland. In 2003, Gusenbauer appointed Darabos as the national SPO Party Manager. From 2004 to 2007, Darabos was a member of the federal parliament. In the 1990s he represented the SPO on the Viewers' Council of the ORF National Broadcasting Agency and represented the Croatian minority on the National Minorities Advisory Council.

¶6. (SBU) Darabos' first term as Defense Minister (2007-2008) was overshadowed by consistent criticism from political opponents and the media of his decision to reduce the number of Eurofighter interceptors Austria would buy under an agreement signed by the previous center-right government. He reduced the purchase from 18 fighters to 15 in a money-saving effort. Darabos was a driving force behind Austria's commitment in spring 2008 to supply about 170 peacekeepers to the EU's mission in Chad (EUFOR). In December 2008 he indicated Austria would extend the Chad mission beyond its current March 2009 phase-out date. Throughout 2008 Darabos has repeatedly rejected U.S. calls for renewed Austrian

participation in security tasks in Afghanistan.

¶7. (U) Chronic underfunding of Austria's military will continue to undermine its ability to engage in multinational missions. Austria's defense budget stands at around 0.8 percent of GDP - one of the lowest military budgets in Europe.

¶8. (U) Darabos is the first Austrian Defense Minister to have met his compulsory service requirement through alternative community service in lieu of military service. His hobbies are table tennis and soccer (he heads a local soccer club).

Family

¶9. (U) Darabos is married and has two teenaged children. One of this sons suffered injuries in a traffic accident in the U.S. in 2008. His family still lives in his hometown of Kroatisch-Minihof, Burgenland.

Comment: Viewed With Suspicion by Military

¶10. (C) The Austrian military viewed Darabos with suspicion when he assumed the position of Defense Minister in 2007. Darabos had avoided military service, and his only known view on military issues was his opposition to the Eurofighter. His move to reduce the Eurofighter purchase was widely seen as a political ploy that made no sense from a security perspective. Military contacts complain that Darabos is unable, perhaps unwilling, to secure increased funding for the armed forces. He is widely perceived as an ambitious

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politician stuck against his will in one of Austria's less desirable cabinet posts.

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